



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

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Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

20 Years After 9/11: Examining Emergency Communications 2

November 2, 2021

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attack revealed critical problems with our emergency communications systems. Over 20 years later, we have made great strides in our technology and capabilities, but more remains to be done. On October 7th, first responders testified before the Subcommittee and spoke highly of these advancements and how they have helped strengthen our emergency communications systems. Two of these advancements include the creation of the First Responder Network Authority (FirstNet Authority) and the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS).

Director Chris Rodriguez of the District of Columbia Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency testified that collaboration and dedicated bandwidth “allowed FirstNet to perform reliably for our first responders at the US Capitol on January 6th.” While FirstNet has proved to be reliable for the District, there are ongoing issues, such as interoperability, outages, and off-network challenges. For example, we have seen interference with wireless communications during large-scale natural disasters, such as wildfires or hurricanes.

When Hurricane Ida hit Louisiana, AT&T’s cell towers were down for nearly two days after the storm, which crippled communications, including FirstNet. As a result, first responders struggled to communicate with one another, which undoubtedly hurt their response efforts. The ability to communicate during a disaster is of the utmost importance, and we need to address these gaps and mitigate their impact on emergency communications.

IPAWS, which FEMA administers, is designed to improve public safety through the rapid distribution of emergency messages to as many people as possible over as many communications devices as possible in the event of a disaster. FEMA designed IPAWS to integrate future technologies into the platform so it could improve as technology advances. I hope to hear today how IPAWS has matured and improved communication for communities during emergencies.

Additionally, the Emergency Communications Division at the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has made strides in our emergency communications apparatus through the Safer America Through Effective Public Safety Communications (SAFECOM), which provides guidance and assistance to those using the Homeland Security Grant Program funding to buy emergency communications items. While technology has improved in the last 20 years, we must ensure that as the threat landscape evolves, there continues to be adequate focus and funding for communications infrastructure.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about how their organizations are confronting communications challenges and learning what the Committee on Homeland Security can do to aid them in making our Nation safer.

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